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OBSERVATIONS ON THE WAR IN EL SALVADOR

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NOTE:

The following is based on a short visit to the area [] but also on prior experience with foreign military forces in peace and war in several countries. In other words, the local military scene was not evaluated exclusively in terms of US military concepts & preferences. Communication with locals was facilitated by fluency in idiomatic Spanish.

Summary:

1. The quality of USG personnel encountered, both diplomatic and military from Ambassador to MilGroup sergeants came as a pleasant surprise. The problems described below are not the result of personal inadequacies.
2. At present, the war is being lost. The guerillas are inflicting cumulative physical and political damage without being themselves reduced in the process. A sudden debacle, precipitated e.g. by the ambush and destruction of a major GoS field force in an area close to San Salvador is possible. The not-so-temporary loss of control over a really important province, e.g. Usulután is probable. The deterioration of the GoS situation over time is certain, under present US-GoS policies.
3. The GoS army has a sound tradition as a fighting army, and this shows in the elan of its officers. (See the very positive estimate of J. Keegan et al. in "World Armies", an estimate that is confirmed by direct observation). The GoS army is also grossly under-equipped and mostly poorly trained (see below, I). It remains, however, in that privileged category of 30 or so armies (among the 130 plus armies in the world) whose officers and men do want to fight. They march towards the sound of gunfire, not the other way. This means that the war could be won.
4. But the war cannot be won by the present mixed system, whereby contradictory impulses from the Salvador command and the US side result in worst-outcome compromises. Consider a mini-example: the Salvador method is to use a platoon to guard a bridge; the US method is to use that same platoon to fight guerillas offensively, at night. The compromise solution is a daytime march up the road to look for guerillas--the guerillas of course get away, and the unguarded bridge is destroyed.
5. Because of the state of the GoS army (see below, I), the preferred US tactics are not in fact feasible. The hope that US military training/aid can rapidly improve GoS military capabilities to the point where the compromise methods will not fall between the two stools is unrealistic.

6. US tactics implicitly assume an abundance of radios, helicopters etc. all maintained in top condition. They also assume an abundance of skilled junior leaders. At present rates of materiel improvement & training it will take many years to produce forces fit to implement the tactics USG is now pressing upon the GoS (notably, small-unit night operations--which are exceedingly dangerous when the lack of radios, helicopters or even trucks preclude rapid reinforcement). Certainly US forces would not try to fight as we are now asking the GoS forces to fight, if they were as poorly equipped as the GoS army is. Incidentally, the pressure on GoS officers to do what cannot be done is apt to be demoralizing.

7. On the other hand, insurgencies have been defeated throughout history by many armies without US-style equipment holdings precisely by the methods which come naturally to the GoS: mainly static defense, occasional ambushes of betrayed guerilla bands, and punitive actions against villages that cooperate with the guerillas. A 19th Century army can win against the guerillas by using sound 19th century-type methods, but not by advanced and very demanding tactics under severe humanitarian constraints. Compare in this regard Guatemala's success, without US military advice or aid.

8. Therefore, while the MilGroup's specific training in using equipment etc. is truly excellent, the overall influence of US operational, tactical and political direction is counter-productive.

Conclusions:

1. Serious consideration should therefore be given to a "Guatemala solution", i.e. the termination of US military aid with, however, increased US financial aid. This would allow the GoS to practice the traditional methods of counter-insurgency, without inappropriate US advice and crippling limitations.

2. Further, because of the inherent unsuitability of much US-issue equipment for GoS needs (see II/ 6 below), the GoS could do much better if it were free to supply itself with cheaper/simpler non-MilSpec items, even if part of the funds were misappropriated.

3. If the present policy must be accepted as a given, matters might still be improved by a number of changes within the framework of the present policy.
(See III, below.

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I. The State of the GoS army

1. The GoS army now consists of recruits with a few days of training serving in units which are very short of junior officers and grossly under-equipped (they lack boots, ponchos, field dressings, sandbags, cleaning gear for their rifles, portable radios and trucks --not just high-cost items such as helicopters & artillery).
2. The GoS army has no packaged field rations; food is bought locally by each unit commander, as in the 18th century, and this can easily reveal planned movements to the guerillas in the vicinity. There is no organized medical evacuation, which obviously affects morale.
3. GoS units generally fight with little or no supporting fire from mortars, let alone howitzers; such weapons are very scarce and often barely operable due to age; naturally their crews are ill-trained.
4. The GoS army distributes resources between the 14 military districts (Departamentos) and the mobile field forces according to static criteria; there is therefore no true logistic system to convey scarce items to highest-priority recipients engaged in highest-priority operations. And if a true logistic system were in place, then the necessary transport would be lacking.
5. There is no centralized intelligence system to collect, evaluate and disseminate Intelligence information on the guerillas. (Dead guerillas are not identified; captured guerillas are not properly interrogated, captured documents remain as souvenirs)

II. On US military aid:

1. The GoS is of course very poor. That explains the shortage of helicopters, radars and all costly high-technology items.
2. But the field units also lack very simple essentials that are available or could easily be produced in country: e.g. field dressings, ponchos (40 ill, mainly pneumonia cases in the Atlacatl battalion on May 20, versus 4 wounded in action), cleaning rods & bore brushes (all weapons seen were dirty, some barely usable) sandbags and and field rations. These unglamorous essentials could, and should, be produced in-country, perhaps with US financial aid.

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3. The field units also lack essentials that could be imported cheaply enough to be affordable even by the GoS, such as commercial short-range, hand-held radios (Toshiba/ Motorola type), small trucks etc. (The Morazan Departamento had 6 trucks on May 20, to support forces that needed 80+).

4. It seems therefore that the GoS has not mobilized local resources, and neither are the GoS forces sharing what they do have to ensure that the most critical needs are met. (E.g. the very active Morazan "Department" Hq in the endangered town of S.Francisco Gotera only has two 81mm mortars; reportedly the Guardia Nacional has 40 (forty) mortars totally idle with no trained crews at all.)

5. One factor in the situation is the expectation that US military aid will increase & take care of all needs.

6. Further, it must be recognized that in general, US military equipment is suitable only for wealthy, highly-trained armies, i.e. the opposite of the GoS forces. E.g. the expensive (\$ 450+) M.16 rifle must be kept very clean, while the cheaper (\$ 200-) AK-47s and other comparable weapons will function quite well even when dirty. E.g. the M.60 machine-gun ammo belts must be kept in their boxes till use; that is appropriate for a motorized/airborne army which can deliver ammo boxes as and where needed. But GoS forces move on foot and the only way to carry ammo belts conveniently is "bandito" style, draped across the body--but then malfunctions are common. Similarly, US field radios etc. are very expensive and over-elaborate for GoS needs, US C-rations are over-luxurious , etc.

7. This suggests that direct budget grants could advantageously replace US military aid. If, say, 20% is misappropriated and only 80% remains, that 80% might still buy more capability by substituting cheaper/simpler items for current US MilSpec items (e.g. Motorola hand-held radios in lieu of PRC 77s, etc.) In addition, the termination of item-specific US military aid might induce a greater mobilization of local resources. Compare in this regard Guatemala equipment purchases.

III. Scope for improvements within the framework of the current policy.

(a): a combined military-economic action.

Provide US financial aid for the local purchase of low-technology military essentials (boots, ponchos, sandbags, stretchers, uniforms, packaged field rations, webbing, field-dressing packs). This would save much money as compared to US-issue items and would stimulate local industry, creating employment etc.

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III. Cont.

(b): re-orient the MilGroup and add contract-personnel.

It was argued above that (i) US specific training (e.g. in the use of mortars etc.) is very useful and (ii) that US operational/tactical advice is counterproductive since it actually yields worst-outcome compromises. If so, it follows logically that the 55 men are best used to provide specific training in detail. High-quality SF master sergeants operating in the Departamentos can train mortar crews, institute proper weapon-cleaning, teach simple micro-tactics (weapon and CP siting etc.); if two are sent to each Departamento visible improvement should follow quickly. In other words, reduce the number of officers in the MilGroup and increase the number of high-grade, versatile NCOs. Additionally, the GoS might hire such people from the ranks of the retired to serve as contract personnel & thus augment the MilGroup indirectly: in the US there seem to be many aficionados available who would be willing to help for small wages and the excitement.

> (c): an operational suggestion.

At present rates of progress, the upgrading of the GoS forces as a whole to the point where they can implement US-style counter-insurgency would take years; in the meantime, purposeful offensive action that will actually kill or capture guerillas is unfeasible; there are only futile sweeps. A "Gideon" solution should therefore be considered, since it could yield guerilla-reducing capabilities in a matter of months.

A "Gideon" solution would leave the bulk of GoS forces for static defense duties and concentrate most US training and material aid to upgrade one GoS field force (say of 2000-2500 men) to make it truly mobile and truly effective for US-style counter-insurgency. Experience elsewhere suggests a format which combines heli-borne troops, parachute troops (the GoS army does have a parachute battalion of sorts), attack aircraft (the present GoS A-37s would do fine, if properly maintained), and ground scouts. The scouts are essential to find the guerillas and designate their location; heli-borne troops then come in to attack with air support; the parachute element of the force is then dropped where it is most likely to catch fleeing guerillas.

Obviously, it would take very high-level USG persuasion to induce the GoS to accept this solution, which would of course violate the traditional spoils system. Moreover, at present very low levels, US aid might not suffice even for a small Gideon force and its replacement companies-in-training (which are essential since units used for such high-stress tactics cannot be kept in the field for more than a few months). Nevertheless, this elite-force solution could be more appropriate than the present attempt to upgrade and expand the GoS army concurrently, given the urgency of the situation.